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ABSTRACT

Communication as a language-learning goal is legitimate, but it is claimed that some of the situational and functional techniques in pursuit of that goal are not. The value of most of the practice techniques generally used in second language classes is also questioned. In their place, a process of learner-centered analyses and communication activities are suggested, among which are the following: (1) to create and/or foster genuine communication situations in the classroom, and (2) to help learners become more sensitive to linguistic contexts. For example, it is suggested that students listen to a recording of someone apologizing to someone else. The students could be taught how to analyze the language model they heard and encouraged to engage in activities which are intuitive, affective, or interpretational in nature. In this way, students may be led to the goal that is envisioned, namely, the development of a feeling for the language. (AMH)

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Practice and Communicative Competence – Too Much of a Bad Thing

Heather Murray

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Language teaching, particularly spoken language teaching, is currently riding a communicative bandwagon. This movement reflects the concern of modern linguists to account not only for the formal coding of language, but for the appropriateness and meaningfulness of language in the context in which it is used. It has been marked by numerous and varied investigations into the many aspects of language in context: personal interaction, expression of intention, infratextual relationships, etc.

One of the first fruits of these investigations, filtered down to language teaching by way of applied linguistics, has been a functional/notional approach. Rare indeed is the material produced nowadays that does not mention its debt to WILKINS *Notional Syllabuses*, or does not bear the «new, improved» *communicative* imprimatur. This is not to say that there is anything wrong with signalling a change in product, nor do I wish to imply that these are steps in the wrong direction. Not at all. Communication as a language learning goal is legitimate, but some of the techniques now used in pursuit of that goal are not. I hope to show that most practice techniques, and perhaps the whole idea of practice as we now define it, are not sufficient for learning how to communicate. Instead, I shall stress the necessity of learner-centred analysis and communication activities.

The communicative approach has now been for the most part accepted by language teachers and materials producers and their publishers. It did not take much argument to persuade them that the learner's ultimate goal was communication – at least as far as the spoken language was concerned.[1] The way had in fact been well prepared by «situational» grammar teaching, which developed during the sixties. The battle against substitution drills and the stark stimulus-response model had been fought and won before terms like «function» and «speech act» arrived on the scene.

The dialogue – two or three people talking to each other – was (and is) the model of communication in situational courses. The «situation» was where the speakers were (in the restaurant, at the station), or what they were talking about (last summer's holidays, an interview for a job).

1 I have chosen to deal with spoken language only here. For a communicative approach to written language, see WIDDOWSON (1978).

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As such they were vehicles for the grammatical structures and vocabulary associated with and illustrated by that particular situation.

The situational approach saw natural language as existing only *in situation*, and so practice exercises were also rendered more natural by being made situational. They came, in time, to resemble a dialogue between teacher and student or even between student and student. Drills like this one,

> Teacher: «He saw her yesterday. MEET.»
> Student: «He met her yesterday.»

were changed to

> T: «When did he meet her?»
> S: «He met her yesterday.»

and finally became little situations in themselves:

> T: «Yesterday Tony went to visit some friends of his. While he was at their house, he. . . . Now, when did Tony see Sheila?»
> S: «He saw her yesterday.»

The drill dialogue was made as natural as possible within the confines of structural practice.

This was about as far as the situational teaching of grammar had got when the impact of communicative competence theory was first felt on language teaching. It is not difficult to see why the new approach met with relatively little resistance. The notion of «situation» could be expanded to «sociolinguistic context» – not just *where* the speakers were having their conversation, but *who* they were and *why* they were having a conversation of this particular sort. The idea that written and spoken language were two different varieties appropriate to different contexts also made sense. A concurrent boom in the production of English language teaching materials[2] gave the communicative movement added momentum. Existing courses were revised with an added functional ingredient and new materials have been produced, which run the gamut from functionally-labelled traditional grammars to whole-heartedly functional courses.

The theoretical communicative model of language is extremely complex and its elaboration is incomplete. This has led, perhaps inevitably, to simplification for language teaching purposes, with certain factors be-

2 There is, of course, a communicative movement in the teaching of languages other than English as well, but so far much more has been published for English language teaching.

ing emphasized at the expense of others. Functional teaching of the spoken language tends to stress the expression of intentions (persuading, giving opinions, making suggestions, etc.) along a formal-to-informal range.

Doubt and disappointment

At present, after three or four years' experience with communicative materials, I detect a mood of uneasiness and even dissatisfaction among some teachers because the results of functional teaching are not much more natural or communicative or appropriate than they were before. I hear teachers saying things like, «Students can apologize beautifully during the exercises practising «apology», but when it comes to a real apology situation things fall apart.»

In the hope of shedding some light on the problem, I would like to examine the way in which functions are practised and, in fact, raise the question of whether we want to do much practice of any sort.

Let us for the moment remain with the function of apology and see how it might be practised in a typical communicative course. First, there is usually a model dialogue featuring several exponents of the function under consideration. These instances of apology, phrases in most cases, are then picked out of the dialogue for the student, expanded, perhaps classified as formal or informal and then practised as individual items. The practice phase (at its worst) may be something like:

T: «Did you bring my book?»
S: «Oh no, I'm sorry, I left it at home».
T: «And what about the pen I lent you yesterday?»
S: «Oh, I'm sorry, I forgot that, too.»

For those who reject the blatant behaviourism of the above, there is:

T: «You're at a friend's house and your child spills something on the sofa. What do you say?»
S: «I'm terribly sorry about your sofa.»

Or there are the more refined techniques of partner-practice, in which students simulate apology conversations after being given situations and roles:

Pairwork: You had arranged to meet your friend yesterday after class, but you forgot about it. Apologize to him/her.

Of course this sort of activity is not really communicative at all, in that the learner is not expressing his own intentions. Neither is he having any

effect on his interlocutor, since both know what he is supposed to be saying from the beginning. A further problem is the discrepancy between the whole and its parts which afflicts all forms of practice involving discrete items. Indeed, the meaninglessness of the practice and the unnatural repetition of apology situation after apology situation may cause learners to make errors in tone of voice, intonation, gesture and facial expression – errors which they might not have made in a *real* situation.

If we look at these practice exercises from a more theoretical point of view, we find that they have the following major faults:

- They over-simplify the context in which the appropriate utterance should occur.
- They compel the learner to be concerned with form rather than with meaning, by telling him what to mean or what he has meant.
- They ignore, by their emphasis on production, the other half of the communication model – comprehension.

Some suggestions

What, then, can be done to make language teaching more communicative? I can think of at least two things. The first is to create and/or foster genuine communicative situations in the classroom; the second is to help learners to become more sensitive to linguistic contexts.

There are many natural communicative situations that can arise in a classroom if they are allowed to. Genuine explanations, orders, requests and greetings can and do occur every day. The problem is that this routine classroom communication is often restricted and unvaried in regard to role, status and intention.

Teachers and course writers need to be more sensitive to these and other potential communication situations so that they can take effective advantage of them.[3] In some cases this will mean that once the opportunity for communicative activity has arisen the teacher should step back from his role as determiner of the course of events. It may also mean encouraging students to help each other with corrections and explanations, and to decide for themselves how learning will proceed. Projects (e.g. planning a trip, making a multi-media dossier, conducting experiments), for which students assume most of the responsibilities, may be

3 For more ideas on potential classroom communication, see RICHTERICH and SCHERER (1975).

undertaken. They provide a change from using language to talk about learning language, which can become exhausted as a topic.

Certain games are also excellent opportunities for communicative language[4], although, unfortunately, many language teaching games have been rendered non-communicative by their pedagogical component. Students can of course be encouraged to make up or bring in their own games.

My second suggestion for helping students acquire communicative competence is a stage in learning that is usually done *for* the learner by materials writers, or is run through very quickly in class before proceeding to practice exercises. I am talking about an analysis or sensitization phase.

In courses proposing to teach the spoken language there is usually a preliminary input phase in which a model of the language variety under consideration is presented (often in the form of a dialogue!). Teaching is divided up into three major phases:

INPUT →	PRACTICE →	APPLICATION
(model of language in context)	(manipulation of input items)	(simulations, tests, real life. . .)

I have been arguing that the typical practice phase is probably not a very effective way of preparing learners for a communicative application phase. It emphasizes certain «bits» and disregards others which may be important to a realization of the «whole». It distorts by over-simplification.

If the learner were given a more active role in the analysis of the input model, instead of spending so much time on practice, some of this distortion and over-simplification might be avoided. To go back to the «apology» example, let us suppose that the learner is given a recording – the more authentic the better – of someone apologizing to someone else. The chunk of language should be big enough to provide a social and psychological context. To understand what is going on and to use this understanding in his own communicative efforts, the learner must be aware of (or be made aware of) who the speakers are, their relationship to each other, their moods and emotions, their social status, possible underlying motives for their conversation and so on.[5] He should be allowed to and if necessary shown how to analyze a language model in the light of his own needs.

4 A handbook on Communication Games from the British Council's English Language Teaching Institute is to come out this year.

5 C. Candlin in his introduction to COULTHARD (1977) calls for a similar sort of analysis.

Teachers and course writers can help learners acquire sensitivity to language in context by developing a whole range of activities that bring the learner into prolonged and open contact with the language model. These activities may be factual, intuitive, affective or interpretational in nature. They may, for instance, involve acting, singing, drawing, matching photographs, checking recordings, as well as listening to or reading questions and answering them. In a sense, what we would be trying to develop here is «Sprachgefühl».

I have tried to argue that by using practice techniques left over from structural methods, language teaching has sabotaged its first attempts to teach communicative competence. This does not mean, of course, that the undertaking should be abandoned. More teaching time should, rather, be spent in sensitizing students to the communication going on in and outside the classroom, and in giving them the opportunity to apply this new knowledge. We cannot teach communicative competence with linguistic competence techniques.

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